

VZCZCXRO9598
PP RUEHBW RUEHLN RUEHPOD RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHMO #1180 1191109
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 281109Z APR 08
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7817
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHXD/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

UNCLAS MOSCOW 001180

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [SOCI](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: PUTIN PAYS HOMAGE TO YELTSIN

¶1. (U) Summary: In what may be the continuation of a reconsideration of first Russian President Boris Yeltsin's legacy that began with Yeltsin's death last year, President Putin and president-elect Medvedev joined family members, several government ministers, Patriarch Aleksey II and hundreds of other guests April 23 at a commemoration of the first anniversary of Yeltsin's death at Moscow's historic Novodevichiy Monastery. Speaking at a grave newly-adorned with a monument depicting the Russian tri-color, Putin softened his standard critique of the '90s and emotionally praised Yeltsin for his leadership, in addition to using the occasion to underline the continued importance of a strong presidency for Russia. The GOR announced that Yeltsin's alma mater, Urals State Technical University in Yekaterinburg, will soon bear his name. End summary.

¶2. (U) On April 23, Russia's elite gathered at the Novodevichiy Monastery cemetery to pay homage to the first President of the independent Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, on the first anniversary of his death. Putin, president-elect Medvedev, Yeltsin's family, Patriarch Aleksey, and a number of government ministers were the most prominent of the several hundred guests present at a ceremony that featured prominently on the national news that evening.

¶3. (SBU) The ceremony was solemn and brief. Yeltsin remains unpopular with many Russians, who associate his time in power with the wrenching economic transition of the 1990s, and Putin in his standard stump speech has relentlessly criticized the period as a time of chaos. This time around, however, the President chose to praise Yeltsin as someone who "swam against the stream and led the public toward new goals" during that same turbulent period, and as "one of the twentieth century's most outstanding politicians."

¶4. (SBU) Putin also used his remarks to underline the importance of the power of the presidency, which he described as the one "consistent guarantee of the Constitution and our citizens' rights." He promised that the presidency would "continue to serve the Russian people and protect (Russia's) sovereign interests."

¶5. (SBU) The large, yet simple memorial is a stone representation of the Russian tri-color flag. Putin said that the flag "is proof of the long struggles for democracy that our people have suffered." The President, fighting tears, praised Yeltsin for returning the flag to "Russia's history, our country and our people."

¶6. (U) Many commentators noted a softening of the tone used by Putin to describe Yeltsin's tenure as President. In an April 25 editorial, the Moscow daily "Nezavisimaya Gazeta" thought that Putin's apparent change of heart was more than just the Russian cultural reluctance to speak ill of the dead, and welcomed the more positive tone, noting that "life, like Yeltsin's own personality," is complex.

¶7. (U) Yeltsin's grave and that of cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, who also died last year, occupy space in Novodevichiy that previously was a pedestrian thoroughfare. (The cemetery, a coveted burial place for both Russian cultural luminaries and members of the political elite, is filled to capacity.)

¶8. (SBU) Comment: Putin's gentler treatment of the '90s and decision to disassociate Yeltsin from them may have been made with an eye to his own legacy as he prepares to leave the presidency. A bill passed by the Duma the same week will authorize the funding and building of a presidential library for Putin, no doubt part of the process of cementing that legacy as the President enters the more turbulent waters of the prime ministership.
RUSSELL